

## Healthy People, Healthy Planet

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*Happy Red Nose Day! Hopefully you get some comic relief today and have a little fun for charity. Our director Rhona MacDonald was invited to attend a Comic Relief reception held last night at 10 Downing street. We are proud to report that Gordon Brown congratulated her personally on the good work done by The Lancet. Well done Rhona! Today's blog comes from Oliver Thomas, a Medsin member and student at the University of Bath. Oliver reports for us on Medsin and UCL's recent Healthy People, Healthy Planet Conference. Read on to discover why one of Fidel Castro's past programs may be a model for us today.*

Last Saturday, 50 students gathered at the UCL Institute for Child Health for the Medsin South-East Region annual conference to discuss climate change and its effects on global health. Climate change and poverty are arguably the most important global health issues of the 21st century. Predictions suggest that many of the world's poorest countries, having contributed only a tiny fraction of total greenhouse gas emissions, will be hardest hit. Medsin-UCL co-presidents Mustafa Abbas and Davina Patel introduced the conference, emphasising the need for students and health professionals to be educated about climate change and to be inspired to take action to improve the situation.

The first session of the day focussed on the basic science underlying our understanding of climate change and how changes in climate will affect the world's health. Dr. Stuart Robinson presented data indicating that human society has developed in a period of extreme climactic stability. As a species we have found it difficult to cope during times when temperatures have been at the extremes. In the future, these extremes will be more and more common. Changes in supplies of resources such as food, water and energy, and rising sea levels may lead to conflict, mass migration and widespread disease.

Professor Ian Roberts discussed some of the health implications of our reliance on fossil fuels and the powerful incentives that keep us using them. He said that fossil fuels have replaced food as the main source of energy for movement – we walk less now than at any time in history. Citing a Canadian study that showed that the mean BMI in Canada increased between 1978 and 2004, while the distribution about the mean remained similar, he showed that everyone, not just the fattest, may be getting

fatter. He advocated increased investment in the bicycle industry and provisions for cyclists, saying that when Cuba had limited access to oil, Fidel Castro declared the "era of the bicycle", which has caused decreases in diabetes, heart disease and stroke in the Cuban population.

The keynote speaker for the conference was Dr Mayer Hillman. Central to his message was the idea that the statement "we have an unalienable right to do what we want as long as it is done in the most energy-efficient way possible" is completely false. Before the industrial revolution, the atmosphere contained 250ppm (parts per million) carbon dioxide; now it contains 380ppm, and we will be lucky if this figure does not increase beyond 500ppm in the future. Dr. Hillman described and advocated the principle of contraction and convergence, whereby everyone has an equal carbon allowance that is gradually reduced over time. Carbon allowances could be traded, so that those with more environmentally friendly lifestyles could sell to over-consumers of carbon. The system gives everyone an incentive to reduce their carbon emissions and also promises a global re-distribution of wealth (because there is a positive correlation between wealth and carbon emission), reducing inequities and hopefully raising standards of living for the poorest people.

The whole afternoon focussed on advocacy. Professor Anthony Costello noted that politicians always have short-term agendas to think about, and that we need to do everything we can to keep them constantly thinking about climate change. He echoed George Monbiot, who wrote "People don't riot for austerity; they riot because they want more, not less. We have to riot for less".

Dr. David Pencheon urged action on climate change, saying "the credit crunch is about borrowing from future generations, the climate crunch is about stealing from them". He described ways in which good data well articulated can create change. The use of appropriate information technology (such as Twitter and Facebook) and popular culture (such as the film "The Age of Stupid") can be the keys to raising public awareness. He also emphasised the need to create incentive for powerful organizations and individuals by giving good business cases for the necessary changes, and rewarding the most successful with recognition for their efforts. The day was a great success; I went away better educated and more motivated. The consensus among the speakers was that climate change is happening now and that things will definitely get worse before they get better, but that we can and should act to ensure the best future for everyone.

*Oliver Thomas*